

Beyond Kurdistan? The Mesopotamia Social Forum and the appropriation and re-imagination of Mesopotamia by the Kurdish movement.

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Abstract

Through its integration in the Global Justice Movement and the establishment of its own Social Forum, activists of the Kurdish Movement in Turkey seek to contest, re-appropriate and change the ‘conceived spaces’ of Turkey’s Kurdish Southeast. This case-study of the Mesopotamia Social Forum provides a window onto how activists assess the existing inequalities and initiate alternative politics, and how these are informed by and related to changing political discourses on the role of civil society and democratization, the latter being rethought and narrated in the ideological discourse of the movement. The region of Mesopotamia is thereby reclaimed and reproduced as a political space that is to serve as a postnationalist imaginary and consequently go beyond ‘Kurdistan’.

Introduction: The production of a political space

Contemporary geographers have convincingly argued for a relational approach to space and place. Indeed, any nation, region or city is also a product of relations which spread out way beyond it.¹ The local and global are actually mutually constituted, which goes against the tendency to imagine the local as a product of the global, ruling out agency.² In fact, the local all too often figures as a victim of globalization, consequently diminishing our understanding of the potential of local agency. The local is not simply always a victim or, conversely, a

¹ Doreen Massey, “Geographies of Responsibility”, *Geografiska Annaler*, v. 86, n. 1, 2004, p. 6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 10

redoubt against the global. Instead, the local can be conceived of as the moment through which the global is constituted, invented and produced.³ Space does not just ‘exist’, waiting to be discovered, but is created through a whole series of forms and scales by social individuals.⁴ Consequently the local can seek to alter the mechanisms of the global. This may imply strategies and tactics that consciously seek to contest perceived threats of globalization (cultural homogenization, international capitalism, etc). The Kurdish movement’s ideological appropriation and re-imagination of Mesopotamia may be regarded as such an attempt. It seeks to produce an alternative political imaginary and consequent political project in answer to the socio-political realities it holds responsible for existing inequalities. This paper seeks to inquire this appropriation and re-imagination of Mesopotamia (rather than Kurdistan – see below). Taking the Mesopotamia Social Forum as a starting point, an investigation is made of the regionally initiated ideological change aspired to by the activists of the Kurdish movement and (steered) by the movement’s political leadership. This paper bears testimony to the ongoing project of the Kurdish Movement to re-think the spatial order of current politics, moving from the idea of Kurdistan as a classical nation-state toward a project for autonomy, within its philosophy of a democratic society, and, at the same time, opening up a political space of its own by means of performative political acts, such as the 2009 Mesopotamia Social Forum.

“*Cîhanke Din Jî Pêkan E*”: Another World is Possible!

“Wir denken, dass allein die Gründung eines derartigen Forums in unserer Region allen voran KurdInnen, aber auch anderen Menschen und Völkern, einen Rahmen dafür bieten wird, unsere Stimme erheben zu können und gegenseitiges Vertrauen und Solidarität aufzubauen.”

“We believe that founding this kind of forum in our region can serve as a framework for Kurds primarily, but also other people and peoples, to increase our voice and to build mutual confidence and solidarity.”

(Sultan Toptaş, MSF organizing committee member,

³ Ibid., p. 11

⁴ Keith Halfacree, “Rural Space: Constructing a three-fold architecture”, in Paul J. Cloke, Terry Marsden, and Patrick H. Mooney (eds.), *Handbook of Rural Studies*. Sage Publications, London, pp. 44-62.

from his interview in Kurdistan Report, Nr.142, May/June 2009)⁵

Together with my Kurdish friend Zozan, I explored the Mesopotamia Social Forum site in Diyarbakır's Sümer Park. A huge tent had been put up in the park, in front of which were hung banners calling for international solidarity and socialism. On the flanks of the tent pictures of the Mexican Zapatista-movement were displayed, bearing testimony to the global diffusion and appropriation of 'traveling' anti-capitalist symbols and action repertoires. In the top of the trees surrounding the tent I noticed a flag that displayed a picture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, taken at the time he was still living under Syrian protection in Damascus. In a smaller tent next to the tent brochures, leaflets and magazines of the Kurdish movement were displayed and the famous *kafiyyes* on sale, in the obligatory Kurdish yellow, red or green. Finding the emblems of the Kurdish movement so openly displayed surprised me. It stood in sharp contrast to the environment of insecurity that had prevailed in Diyarbakır in the 1980s and 1990s. Back then, the state of emergency was still in place, allowing for fierce repression by the Turkish security forces and their intelligence service. The PKK insurgents were in active combat with the Turkish military and the people living in the Kurdish provinces subject to continuous surveillance. In particular, public life had suffered from curfews and restrictions, creating both physical and psychological barriers for collective action.⁶

The war had not ended, but a more peaceful atmosphere had emerged following the capture of Öcalan in 1999 and the subsequent unilateral cease-fires by the PKK, combined with a change in the political atmosphere due to the election into central government of a new party (the AKP) and into local office of the Kurdish political party, DEHAP. The latter event in particular allowed Kurdish political activists to more actively pursue political change by other means than armed struggle. Indeed, as Gambetti has convincingly argued, with DEHAP's election to the metropolitan municipality of Diyarbakır, "[...] *the municipality become an engine force that opened new spaces of communication and expression, which not only fostered cultural life, but also allowed for new political publics to emerge.*"⁷

⁵ All translations by the author.

⁶ Zeynep Gambetti, "The conflictual (trans)formation of the public sphere in urban space: The case of Diyarbakır", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, n. 32, pp. 43-71, 2005. See also Nicole F. Watts, "Activists in Office: Pro-Kurdish Contentious Politics in Turkey", *Ethnopolitics*, v. 5, n. 2, pp. 125-144, 2006.

⁷ Zeynep Gambetti, "The conflictual (trans)formation of the public sphere in urban space: The case of Diyarbakır", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, n. 32, 2005, op cit. 53.

Of importance to the opening up of a local space for political and civic activism in the southeast of Turkey was the fact that the state's presence was already confined to a military presence and its political legitimacy undermined by repressive measurements in face of the PKK insurgency and the popular support it enjoyed. Consequently municipalities run by the Kurdish party – reformed as the DTP following the banning of DEHAP – thus came to be perceived by their local constituency as both benevolent actors willing to ensure their socio-economic well-being and political representatives asserting the rights of Kurdish people and fighting for political security against the local elements of the state.⁸ In so doing, they found ways to draw in EU-financing for local development and civil society projects. This allowed them to circumvent the dependency on Ankara, Turkey's capital, and implied further incorporation of and adaptation to the 'civil society talk' that had become increasingly popular internationally since the end of the Cold War era in the 1990s and throughout the 2000s. This was the time and context in which political activists of the Kurdish movement, and in particular the Mayor of Diyarbakir, started to become involved in the Global Justice Movement, taking the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre (2001) as an inspiration.

Participation into the Global Justice Movement

The Social Forums constitute part of the global justice movement, known also as the anti-globalization movement, that is thought by some to have developed with the revolt of the Zapatistas (EZLN) in Chiapas in 1994, and by others with the 1999 Seattle meeting in opposition to the World Trade Organization. The Global Justice Movement is currently defined as a *“loose network of organizations (with varying degrees of formality and even including political parties) and other actors engaged in collective action of various kinds, on the basis of the shared goal of advancing the cause of justice (economic, social, political, and environmental) among and between peoples across the globe”* (Della Porta 2007: 6). It developed from a critique of the Old Left for neglecting issues of human rights in its struggle for state power and following the leftist movement's failures having achieved state power. Today, the Social Forums gather together a wide range of groups and organizations opposed to neoliberal globalization and imperialism in all its forms.⁹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein, “The dilemmas of open space: the future of the WSF”, *ISSJ-UNESCO*, pp. 629-637, 2004.

Particularly attractive for the Kurdish movement – as for other representatives of marginalized groups worldwide – has been the Global Justice Movement’s promotion of diversity in contrast to all kinds of hegemonic thinking or *pensée unique*.¹⁰ The stress on the importance of diversity relates to the criticisms that befell nationalist and labor movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, which, albeit for different reasons, both regarded internal uniformity (thus conformity) as essential for the development and growth of their political projects, ultimately leading to different forms of dictatorship and the repression of socio-cultural diversities, including those centered on ethnicity. This is a critique upon which Abdullah Öcalan has also elaborated in order to reposition his political movement in the political spectrum, what is more, the debate over the ethnic dimension of the so-called “southeastern question” had been breaking point within the Left in Turkey throughout the second half of the 20th Century, as testify other contributions to this special issue. For the GJM, the importance of diversity is not only a recognition of social and cultural diversity in and of itself but also deemed an essential feature (ideological value, structural principle) of the GJM itself, which thus does not seek to unify and establish central power but aims to preserve internal diversity through relying on multiple intersecting networks.¹¹ Inspired by the GJM, mayors and activists for pro-Kurdish causes would actively take part in the European Social Forum in Athens (2005), and ultimately set up their own Forum in the fall of 2009.



¹⁰ Geoffrey Pleyers, “The Social Forums as an ideal model of convergence”, ISSJ-UNESCO, pp. 507-517, 2004.

¹¹ Ibid.

Re-appropriating and reconfiguring political space

The Mesopotamia Social Forum was intended to serve as a platform for the re-appropriation and reconfiguration of political space. It was constitutive also of the public space that is being created regionally in Turkey's Southeast¹², wherein the organization of the MSF served as a performative act, displaying the means of the Kurdish movement to contest the existing authority structures (Gambetti 2004: 45).¹³ The organizers presented the Social Forum as:

“[A] range of social initiatives, unions, civil society organizations, local governments, and individuals based in Mesopotamia, the cradle of humanity and for centuries a source of inspiration for the world's socio-cultural development, our aim is to come together with a growing number of groups worldwide who declare ‘another world is possible.’”¹⁴

The MSF was envisioned by its organizers as the starting point of a broad social movement for the whole of the Middle East, in which the Kurdish movement – similar to the Zapatista's active in the autonomous Mexican province of Chiapas¹⁵ – aspires to play a vanguard role. The MSF was organized with the support of the Council of the World Social Forum, following upon the 2005 Turkish Social Forum and preceding the European Social Forum (ESF) held in Istanbul the following summer (July 2010). One of the ESF preparatory meetings was consequently held in Diyarbakır in the run-up to the MSF.

The MSF sought to attract international attention and draw in participation from activists in and outside of the Middle East, even though the focus of the majority of its panels was the regional developments inside southeastern Turkey. Among the signatories to the MSF were many broadly leftist Southeast-based associations (representing human rights, women's rights, writers, poverty, the media and culture centers), as well as a range of nationally based workers' unions and cooperatives, along with the DTP and the Labor Party, Revolutionary

¹² See Nicole F. Watts, *Activists in Office*, Washington University Press, Washington, 2010, but also Marlies Casier, Joost Jongerden and Nic Walker, “Fruitless Attempts? The Kurdish Initiative and the Containment of the Kurdish Movement in Turkey”, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, n. 44, pp. 103-27, Spring 2011.

¹³ Zeynep Gambetti, “The conflictual (trans)formation of the public sphere in urban space: The case of Diyarbakır”, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, n. 32, p 45, 2005.

¹⁴ MSF Program 2009, p. 2.

¹⁵ For a comparative analysis of Turkey's Kurdish movement and the Zapatista's see Zeynep Gambetti (2009), Politics of place/space: The spatial dynamics of the Kurdish and Zapatista Movements. *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 41: 43-87.

Socialist Workers Party, Workers Movement Party, Socialist Democracy Party, Green Party of Turkey and others close to the DTP-led municipalities in the Kurdish inhabited region.¹⁶ The aim of the MSF was defined as “*being a source of solidarity to stand against mankind’s tyranny over fellow man and nature, which has led to all forms of decay and destruction.*”¹⁷ Whereas the majority of the participants on the panels as well as the audience consisted of local Kurdish (and Turkish) activists, a number of foreign activists and associations were present, such as the Palestinian People Solidarity Association (FHDD) and the Palestinian Popular Front for Liberation (FHKC), the Association of Women’s Committees in Palestine, the Israeli Women’s Coalition for Peace, the Italian *Un Punto Per* and COBAS-Italy, as well as trade unions from Lebanon.

In the run-up to the MSF, calls had been made by the host organizer, the DTP-run Greater Municipality of Diyarbakır, for all interested to submit panel proposals. Dozens of meetings were held to mobilize for the Forum, in Kurdish cities (such as Batman and Van, and also Erbil in Kurdish [North] Iraq¹⁸), as well as with Armenian, Palestinian and Syrian sympathizers in the neighboring countries.¹⁹ Kurdish activists in Europe, utilizing their existing networks of cooperation with the local civil societies in Germany, Italy, France, Spain and Belgium, called for European activists to participate in the MSF and the Amed International Youth Camp, which was organized simultaneously. Whereas the MSF functioned as a platform to unite different organizations and parties, the Amed International Youth Camp functioned as a means to socialize European activists into the main ideas and goals of the Kurdish movement.

The Mesopotamia Social Forum in Diyarbakır takes its name from Öcalan’s and the Kurdish movement’s use of ‘Mesopotamia’. It refers to the lands populated by Kurds and other ethnic and linguistic groups, in a way that pre-dates the current arrangement of nation-states (and

¹⁶ MSF Program, p. 15

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 2, 2009

¹⁸ Or, from the Kurdist perspective, in Southern (Iraqi) Kurdistan. For ease of reference, standing state boundaries are assumed here for naming purposes, and the standard name ‘the Southeast’ likewise used, which also assumes a standing state reference (to Turkey).

¹⁹ These International connections are interesting in the light of the Kurdish movement’s armed-to-civic transformation, insofar as they figure deep in PKK history. It was in Syria that the PKK leadership was based for many years (Öcalan fled there from Turkey in 1979, while the party was still being established – he himself was from Urfa, a Turkish province bordering Syria), while the PKK received its first military training in an ex-Palestinian base in Lebanon, supported by Palestinian organizations, including Yasir Arafat’s ‘Fatah’ movement (the first experience in armed combat for the PKK was fighting alongside Palestinians against the attacking Israeli forces, in 1982).

thus a geographical area bound of the existing state borders). Its employment operates in Turkey and transnationally (particularly among the Kurds in Europe) to signify a Kurdish identity, the Kurdist cause. It is used, for example, as the name for cultural centers, such as the MKM, *Mezopotamya Kültür Merkezi*, satellite TV channels (Mezopotamya TV, MMC, *Mezopotamya Music Channel*), news agencies (MHA, *Mezopotamya Haber Ajansı*), Facebook pages (*Mesopotamia*), radio stations (*Dengê Mezopotamya*) etc.²⁰

By means of the MSF, the region of Mesopotamia is re-imagined as a political space to be (re)appropriated and transformed. Tellingly, the MSF official program cover displayed an image of the Mesopotamia region that incorporated most of the Middle East – that is, including most of modern day Iran and Saudi Arabia, along with the Eastern Mediterranean and Nile area of the ‘Fertile Crescent’ version of Mesopotamia, and omitting the western part of Turkey. Mesopotamia motifs used in the Kurdish movement, it might be noted, more often show only the rivers area, similar to the maps of Kurdistan (i.e. not the eastern Mediterranean). This cartographical overlap of Kurdistan with Mesopotamia with the Middle East mirrors the discourse of Öcalan and Turkey’s Kurdish movement as represented at the MSF – not least because it effectively puts the Kurdish populated area pretty much at the center. That no borders of any kind were shown on this map was no coincidence either, as it communicated a new imaginary for the political transformation of the Middle East.

Indeed, one of its main organizers of the Forum confirmed that the MSF intended to reclaim Mesopotamia as a place for the creation of a new civilization and that the main means to this end is would be the initiation of a new social movement in the Middle East through the Social Forum.²¹ With the organization of the Forum in the (Turkish) Kurdish heartland, activists from different parts of the world were drawn into the political space the Kurdish movement seeks to re-appropriate and develop. Ultimately the Forum sought to mobilize support for its political project by tapping into transnational activist networks that stretch in and beyond Mesopotamia.

In the following sections I will explain how the MSF provided a window onto (1) the ways in which Kurdish political activists assess the existing inequalities inside Turkey, to explain (2)

²⁰ ‘Amed’, a variation of the ancient name for the city of Diyarbakır, is used similarly – as in the ‘Amed International Youth Camp’).

²¹ Tuncay Ok, from his interview with the author in Diyarbakır, 29 April, 2010.

the lack of democratization in the Middle East and portray the potential role of the Kurdish movement, in contesting these conceived spaces and (3) how these are framed within a more extended narrative by the ideological leader Turkey's Kurdish movement.

(1) *The MSF as a means to assess and explain existing inequalities*

The call for the MSF depicted the region of the Near East and Mesopotamia as suffering from centralistic and theocratic structures that had denied the existences of the different peoples and turned the region into 'a graveyard of peoples'. Referring to the political structures of the modern nation-state the call went on to assert that "*Capitalist modernity and political models based on the nation-state, supported by the West as a solution to theocratic structures, have been unsuccessful in bringing stability, just as they have been unable to democratize the Middle East.*"²²

The grand vision implied in this call was rather parochially interpreted at the Forum itself, however. The panels held at the Mesopotamia Social Forum concentrated on exposing the effects of spatial strategies that have been employed in Southeastern Anatolia by Turkish authorities since the establishment of the Republic. Panels entitled "Mesopotamia in the middle of water and energy wars"; "A story of non-development in the axes of capitalist politics: 'GAP'"; "Use of water against human and nature. The Struggle Experiences", all engaged with a criticism of the existing hydraulic dam projects in Southeastern Anatolia, which are conceived as examples of the contemporary colonialization and exploitation of the Kurdish region of Turkey by the state.²³ Other policies held responsible for the 'backwardness' of the region and its people were equally focused on the Kurdish region of Turkey as opposed to the wider Mesopotamian context, such as "the Bourgeois education system", indicative of the Marxist origins of the PKK (see below), and "urban transformations and urban poverty", related to the overpopulation of the urban centers in the Southeast caused by the forced displacement of Kurdish people from their villages and hamlets as part of Turkey's counterinsurgency warfare against the PKK.

As an imaginary, the Kurdish ethos was depicted by many speakers as natural, harmonic, self-sustaining and maintaining a balance between human and animal life. What was essentially

²² MSF Program, p. 2

²³ Turkey as colonial oppressor is a familiar theme in Öcalan's analysis (see below).

constructed throughout the narrations of the speakers was a rural life which had been uprooted, forcing the Kurdish populations to find refuge into the cities where they had encountered capitalist relations, consumption and poverty. In the words of anarchist Gazi Bertal, who joined the provocatively titled panel ‘We don’t request anything from the state’:

“People of the villages have come to the cities and been turned into the slaves of their labor. They wanted to live in the villages, and sustain themselves, but they have found themselves now living in a world of metal and concrete. How are they to escape from this?”

The disruption of what is narrated as the traditional Kurdish life is understood in this discourse as a conscious, state-led destruction. Poverty is conceived as a politically planned strategy: “*now they are trying to stop the Kurds by means of poverty*”, as one of the participants in the panel put it. Poverty is perceived and explained as the current matrix of a decades old politics of assimilation by the central Turkish government and its administration, as an instrument of political engineering that makes Kurds subordinate and deprives them of their sense of honor and self-worth. Particularly strong, therefore, is the shared imaginary of the Kurds as a self-reliant people in their natural surroundings in contrast to the present miserable existence of the masses in urban slums.

A panel on poverty and development organized by NGO representatives working with the poor on a daily basis was illustrative in this respect. Its participants underwrote the following thesis:

“Those families that migrate in order to produce seasonal labor live in inhumane conditions. They do not have social security and they cannot provide for the needs of their children. In these cities in the West they are social outcasts. They are being described as ‘the children who feed from the dustbins’, as children empty garbage bins in order to earn a living. Poverty has become permanent in many regions.”²⁴

Şerif Camcı, director of Sarmaşık, an umbrella-organization of different municipality-related associations that fight poverty, expressed it more bluntly:

“This is a dark plan. First they impoverish the people so that then they can lend them a helping hand (...) They molest our people through impoverishment. (...) In the past

²⁴ Tahir Dadak, director of the Development Center (an independent NGO in Diyarbakır), from his speech at the MSF.

people were ashamed to ask for help, but now they are coming and asking for food. And thus there is a second goal: people are losing their identity. The poverty degrades them.”

Similarly the panel entitled ‘Use of Water, Against Humanity and Nature. The Struggle Experiences’ defined the huge dam projects on the Tigris, Euphrates and Zap rivers as a means to separate people from one another and to destroy human relations: “*People wanted the power over this land, but they were not allowed to enjoy that right.*” The plans for new hydraulic dams are presented as a form of occupation by the (Turkish) state intended to destroy the social and historical as well as the cultural heritage of the (Kurdish) people:

“The goal of these dams is not to produce electricity but to wash away all this heritage. They try to take away the land from the people. People will be left behind deracinated. In this way the GAP is able to destroy the whole region.”²⁵

Gambetti argues that few researchers have addressed the place-based framing of movements.²⁶ This is in particular relevant with regards to the civil society that developed in Diyarbakir, fully displayed in the MSF. Through the MSF panels and activities, “the lived spaces” or “the spaces of representation” (Lefebvre 1991) – that is, the spaces of expression, conveyed by images and symbols wherein given societal conditions can be called into question (Löw 2008) – were set against the “conceived spaces” of the planners, urbanists and technicians who are pre-structuring the “perceived space” – that is the space-related modes of behavior, bodily experience and the suffering of places (Löw 2008) – through state-led, top-down, imposed policies of displacement and destruction.

(2) *The MSF as a means to re-appropriate and transform the conceived spaces*

According to Lefebvre, emancipatory politics presuppose a particular set of theoretically informed spatial practices aimed at overcoming separation and dissociation of the global ‘whole’ and the ‘local’ everyday: “*The landscape is impregnated with symbols and imagery that have an explicit and insidious impact in spatial practices of everyday life [...] therefore*

²⁵ Abdullah Cabar, from his speech in the MSF, where he was speaking on behalf of the Union of DTP municipalities.

²⁶ Zeynep Gambetti, “Politics of Place/Space: The Spatial Dynamics of the Kurdish and Zapatista Movements”, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, n. 40, pp. 43-87, 2009.

the symbolic landscape remains a formidable means of appropriating space” (Merrifield 1993: 526, referring to Lefevbre’s Production of Space). Opposing the ‘conceived spaces’, activists of the Kurdish movement seek to produce an alternative political imaginary and consequent political project. Many panels at the Forum consequently sought to engage with alternative means to challenge the problems of the (primarily Southeast) region, as these were perceived. Illustrative here were the panels entitled “Anti-racist struggles” (classical Kurdist discourse), “Civil Disobedience Experiences, Militarism and Civil Space” (referencing the change in emphasis from armed to political resistance), “Ecological alternatives” (the Kurdish imaginary, as described), “Cultural transformations in the Middle East and its initiators assembly” (the wider Mesopotamian project); and “Alternative municipality and local government experiences” (the ongoing political project in the Southeast).

The MSF panels sought to increase the capacity of the locally initiated initiatives that seek to strengthen counter-politics, and contributed to the ongoing struggles to ‘decolonize’ not only Diyarbakır and the South East (Gambetti 2008), but also Kurdistan and the Middle East at large. What is more, they were also meant to reaffirm the Kurdish movement’s own role in the political transformation of the claimed political spaces. Exemplary here were speakers’ statements such as: “We have installed in our people consciousness about the importance of nature and historical heritage!”; “We negotiate with the people in our municipalities, this has never been the case before!”; “The experiences we have had here in Diyarbakır are important examples to implement amongst the Kurdish immigrants in Istanbul”; “The kind of political organization we have got here should be transported to the west of Turkey”; “The alternative press should be united”; “The Kurdish press will be the alternative press of Turkey.”

Similar ‘success stories’, such as Mexico’s Zapatistas were referred to, suggesting parallels between the indigenous struggle against the Mexican government and American imperialism on the other side of the Atlantic, and the Kurdish movement’s own struggle for autonomy. As a symbol for the anti-globalization movement, the Zapatistas figured as a reference point throughout the Camp and the MSF. Not only was the Zapatista slogan ‘*Ya Basta!*’ (Enough!) appropriated (as the Kurdish ‘*Edi Beşe*’), but also its activities displayed in a photo exhibition, as well as on stage and in the panels. A German representative of the organization *Ya Basta! Network of solidarity with the Zapatistas* gave an account of the functioning of the autonomous districts under Zapatista control and their independence of the central Mexican

state. The Zapatista movement is assumed to have inspired PKK leader Öcalan in developing his own political concepts that sought to re-invent and re-energize his organization.²⁷

(3) *The MSF as the translation of a new ideological project*

Knowledge of how the whole is constituted and its relation to place and space is that which must be acted upon politically.²⁸ Behind the MSF lies the Kurdish movement's ongoing exercise in the production of 'knowledge' to explain and frame the (locally-lived) experiences of suppression and domination. The MSF philosophy has it that the state apparatus – regarded as in decay – is to be abandoned, and the personal liberation of individuals who constitute the people is to accelerate this process. “*States do not solve problems but create them,*” one of the organizers explained me. He continued:

“The organizations that are connected to the Kurdish movement are civil organizations because **in principle** we seek to develop ties with the social parts of society and **not** with the governmental ones. We want to reach out to the grassroots. We think that social movements are more effective in addressing the problems, whereas states are profit organizations.”²⁹

The organizers' philosophy draws on Öcalan's prison writings, by means of which he has sought to transform the main ideological ideas of the Kurdish movement since his imprisonment in 1999.

The Middle East has been imagined in the writings of Öcalan as unchanged and stagnated, due to the continuation of feudalism, the state system and the showy imitations of the West by its leaders. The aforementioned Middle East as a 'graveyard' perspective (employed in the call for the MSF) is to be found in Öcalan's discourse, as quoted, indeed, in the MSF program: “*The Middle East is a grave, and an inextricable knot of a grave, which remains the same while the rest of the world is constantly changing.*”³⁰ The way Öcalan depicted the

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Andrew Merrifield, “Place and Space: A Lefebvrian Reconciliation”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, v. 18, n. 4, pp. 526, 1993.

²⁹ Tuncay Ok, as quoted from his interview with the author in Diyarbakir, 29 April 2010, author's stress.

³⁰ Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison Writings. The Roots of Civilisation*. Translated by Klaus Happel, Pluto Press, London, 2007, p.279.

Middle East reaffirmed the Western idea of Middle Eastern exceptionalism, as a region incapable of democratization and in need of secularization. Öcalan called for the need to ‘regenerate intellectual life’, to bring about a ‘mental revolution’. “*The true tragedy arises from the inability of the Middle East itself to analyze its own traditions in order to transform them into something more contemporary*”, and “*The region has not yet understood itself*.”³¹ These insights are, of course, particularly pertinent in the light of the recent ‘Arab spring’.

For those familiar with the role of auto-critique or self-criticism as an instrument in the process of PKK militants’ socialization,³² it will indeed appear that Öcalan had assumed the personal exercises in (public) self-criticism could be transposed onto collective bodies as a whole. Öcalan argued that the Middle East needs to develop its own answer in relation to European civilization: that it should neither reject it nor allow itself to be enveloped by it is the message. Instead he called for a ‘counter-offensive’ in which ‘the buried humanistic and civilizational values of the Middle East’ need to be ‘awakened’. It is in this context that by seeking to revive and reclaim Mesopotamia as the cradle of civilization he claims to find authentic and indigenous inspiration: “... *Mesopotamia can be credited with having played a vanguard role over at least 10,000 formative years*,”³³ “*The ideas and memories at the basis of civilisation have been forgotten but they are still there*.”³⁴

It can hardly be a coincidence that Öcalan’s re-invention of the Kurdish imaginary of Mesopotamia through his writings took place in the early 2000s, during the acceleration of Iraqi Kurdistan’s process of political autonomization as well as the simultaneous neoliberal exploitation of Southern Kurdistan by contemporary capitalist forces (by Turkish enterprises in particular). Öcalan’s imaginary developed in dialogue with these ongoing political economical developments amongst the Kurdish brethren in Iraq and provides a way of differentiating and repositioning the goals of the Kurdistan Workers Party vis-à-vis the politics of its competitors in today’s ‘free Kurdistan’.

In the Prison Writings Abdullah Öcalan thus tries to argue against the existence of the state. The state, he argues, results from class society, which results from the division of people into

³¹ Ibid., pp. 279-80

³² See, for example, Olivier Grojean, *La cause kurde, de la Turquie vers l’Europe*, Phd. Thesis, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 2008. URL: <http://oliviergrojean.hautetfort.com/these/>

³³ Öcalan, op cit. p. 86

³⁴ Ibid., p. 278

those who rule and those who are ruled.³⁵ According to Öcalan the ‘state’ has always been passed down as something sacred, but it is a dangerous concept that is meant to preserve exploitation and oppression.³⁶ In order to explain his point, he outlines a historiography of ‘the Sumerian civilization’ which is to serve as an archetype for the current political order(s). Whereas he praises the achievements and impact of the Sumerian ‘first state-society’ that came into existence along the rivers of Tigris and Euphrates in Lower Mesopotamia, however, he criticizes its ‘hegemonic ideology’, as having prepared humankind for the system of slavery and systematic violence, and which was conceived by the Sumerians (and subsequent ‘civilizations’) as a necessary means in the face of the resistance and struggles for freedom of oppressed peoples, classes and individuals.³⁷

According to Öcalan, the existing political institutions need to be replaced in order for a new ‘democratic civilization’ to develop. The state is regarded as resistant to democratic change, in particular as its political institutions are perceived as existing ‘outside of society’.³⁸ The cure is to come from the third sphere, that is ‘civil society’. In Öcalan’s words: “*It is exactly this sphere – which compromises the tools of democratic politics – that opens the door to the developments hitherto impossible.*”³⁹ And thus the need for ‘civil society projects’ that would contribute to the democratization of state institutions and society. Öcalan believes that in the Middle Eastern states societies do not have the strength to democratize themselves: only the development of civil society as this third domain offers the opportunity to end the status quo.⁴⁰

The insistence on the politically transformative role of civil society should be understood in the light of the above mentioned experiences in the establishment of local civil society initiatives by the Kurdish movement in Turkey, within neighborhoods and cities, in particular in these localities where the Kurdish party was able to organize, win support from and increase its leverage on the Kurdish poor and internally displaced. This was in particular so as by the end of the 1990s it was the cities rather than then the mountains that had become the main action terrain for mobilization of political support for Kurdish causes, and the main

³⁵ Ibid., p. 217

³⁶ Ibid., p. 218

³⁷ Ibid., p. 21

³⁸ Ibid., p. 22

³⁹ Ibid., p. 227

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 288

objective of the PKK itself had shifted from a struggle for an independent Kurdish state to a project for the societal and consequently political organization of the region.

Jongerden and Akkaya have persuasively argued that the primary objective of the PKK is still an independent Kurdistan, but that the road to this end is no longer sought by means of state-building, but *society-building*: today the PKK organizational structure does not aim at the establishment of classical state but the construction of what is called ‘Kurdistan Democratic Society’, initiated from below.⁴¹ This is sought by means of the project for ‘democratic confederalism’ – now recast as ‘democratic autonomy’ – build on the ideal of a self-government of local communities and organized in the form of open councils, town councils, local parliaments and congresses (following and probably inspired by the Zapista model).⁴² The Turkish state, but ‘states’ more generally, are held responsible for all forms of subordination. It follows logically that in the withering of the state envisaged, ‘Kurdistan’ cannot stand for a country, and must name a region – one that, however, as ethnically defined is vulnerable to the nationalist (‘racist’) oppression that has characterized statehood during the capitalist period, to wit, that of the Republic of Turkey. Hence the preference for ‘Mesopotamia’.⁴³

Essentially, what is sought is ‘governance by the people’ instead of ‘government of populations’. The ideal is some form of communalism. Therefore, politics should be initiated from the local level. This means, in practice, that the local level becomes the central focus where, municipalities in cooperation with other organizational bodies, such as the Democratic Society Congress (DTK), local NGOs and business associations are to serve as the means of governance by the people. In the words of a founding member of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), the current Kurdish political party (following the High Court closure of the DTP):

“Processes and ideologies of the past should be overcome. In the past we had a hierarchical understanding of the state, but people are longing for democracy, equality and a world of ecological and gender balance. Because of its heterogeneous structure,

⁴¹ Ahmet H. Akkaya & Joost Jongerden, “The PKK in the 2000s: Continuity through breaks?”, in Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden (eds.) *Nationalisms and politics in Turkey: political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish issue*, Routledge, New York, pp. 143-162, 2011.

⁴² Ibid. ; Zeynep Gambetti (personal communication)

⁴³ And ‘Amed’.

the grassroots can produce a way out of the current situation (...) We have to leave the state apparatus behind and go beyond the state. We should accelerate the decline of the state that is already ongoing. (...) The local municipalities are **not the departments of the state** but places where the local population has something to say! States are the cause of violence and this has become controversial. Instead we opt for local governance and this is not in order to feed or help the state. Local municipalities are more than local service providers and they do not reflect the central state. They are based on **governance that involves everyone.**”⁴⁴

Öcalan’s primary philosophical approach in developing the idea of Marxist and Zapatista styled democratic confederalism, currently retranslated into the call for (regional) autonomy, has been through an engagement with political thinkers who have inspired the anti-globalization or global justice movement, such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s ‘anti-globalization bibles’ *Empire* and *Multitude*. Thus, he plays the post-nationalist card, depicting nationalism and capitalist modernity as responsible for the backwardness of the Middle East and the ongoing dictatorial regimes. It is in this post-nationalist, anti-globalist/capitalist framework that Öcalan re-imagines the struggle of his own movement, in terms of the awakening of Kurds, as a civilizing and liberating source in the world. As he states in the concluding paragraphs of his Prison Writings:

“By democratizing themselves, the Kurdish people force the countries and nations among which they live to do the same. In former times the Kurdish movement had always seemed to be at the mercy of external powers. Now it has become a guarantee for peace, liberty and fraternity.”⁴⁵

Öcalan sees it as a historic mission for the Kurds to become the democrats for a (future) democratic Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, and ultimately even an unbounded Middle East: “*The Kurds could be a tool for achieving a democratic Middle East*”.⁴⁶ He calls for the freedom of ‘religions’, ‘ethnic groups’ and ‘minorities’ to organize themselves. No longer is it a state that is to be fought for, but the self-organization of Kurds as Kurds – having liberated themselves through a disengagement from the hegemony of the state and societal hierarchies.

⁴⁴ Demir Celik, BDP President at the time of the MSF, from his speech at the MSF 2009 in the panel on Alternative Municipalities, 27th of September 2009. Emphasis added.

⁴⁵ Öcalan, op cit., p. 296

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 29.

Conceptually, this ideological transformation is represented by the shift in emphasis away from ‘Kurdistan’ towards ‘Mesopotamia’, which is not so much referenced as a pre-state ideal as reclaimed for a future construct. In order to democratize Mesopotamia (the Middle East) and change the political and geographical configuration of the region, it is argued, Kurds must first reshape themselves and develop a democratic mentality free of hierarchical power relations and patriarchy. This psycho-cultural transformation should allow the initiation of a new kind of grassroots politics and society that will find its translation into how people relate to and organize the geography of the region.

The universalism proclaimed is in line with the future Öcalan would like to envision for the Kurdish people, as he believes that the Kurds can, through democratizing themselves, help to democratize the Middle East, and that the Kurdish movement can therefore become a guarantor for peace and liberty. Öcalan has thus also sought to position himself and his movement in relation to the left and former socialist projects. In this way his writings and the subsequent developments in the Kurdish movement in Turkey – including the organization of a Social Forum – are to appeal to the national and international left and serve as a means to assert the PKK’s relevance in the vanguard of international revolutionary movements. Thus he argues that “A socialist way of life and government can only be developed through a profound democratic awareness of society”, and “It is not the state that needs to be strengthened, but society. This is what I call democratic society, and its result will be democratic civilization.”⁴⁷ Progressive forces, in Öcalan’s view, and especially new social movements, are in need of a historical perspective in order to go beyond the superficial towards questions of emancipation – in particular because, as he continues, Marxist theory, ideology and practical politics have been prone to influences from the ideologies and practices of the ruling classes, placing the left in need of ‘constructive self-criticism’.⁴⁸ Obviously, Öcalan would like to see the historiography he himself has developed in his writings to be taken as a starting point for future acts of self-criticism and improvement.

Discussion and concluding remarks

On the conceptual level, the ideological transformation of the Kurdish movement is represented by the shift in emphasis away from ‘Kurdistan’ towards ‘Mesopotamia’. On the

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 236

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 88

practical level, this ambition is given shape where the municipalities run by the pro-Kurdish party cooperate with and reinforce the development of a Kurdish civil society, and where, consequently, a substantive, alternative Kurdish social and political space has come into being, as displayed at the Mesopotamia Social Forum. The ideological shifts find, in other words, very concrete spatial and political translations, while at the same time, being shaped themselves by the socio-political (re)organization in Turkey's Southeast. Thus is the existing socio-political organization of geographies into nation-states being rethought and actively acted upon and transformed in territories variously specified in terms of 'Turkey', 'Kurdistan', 'the Middle East' and now (again) 'Mesopotamia'.

These situated developments are not understandable though through a mere localized reading of the developments of late, but inscribed into a relational approach of place and space,⁴⁹ as demonstrated by the way in which the aforementioned discourses, frames of references and action repertoires of the Global Justice Movement are actively incorporated and adjusted in the (Turkish) Kurdish context. Indeed, these globalized discourses, frames and action repertoires are being appropriated, transformed and acted upon locally by the activists of the Kurdish movement, which in turn still aspires to raise its voice and gain recognition as vanguard movement within the international left. Indeed, the Kurdish movement's ideologically inspired appropriation and re-imagination of Mesopotamia can be regarded an on-going act which, in its relation to and positioning vis-à-vis globally hegemonic forms of political organization, seeks to produce an alternative political imaginary and consequent political project in response to the socio-political realities it holds responsible for existing inequalities, aspiring to increased international recognition for what it perceives as its realizations and thereby repositioning itself globally. In this sense also, Öcalan's historical analysis of the wider region, far from being overtaken and outdated by the various socio-political (re-)configurations and uprisings of the Arab spring, constitutes a radical reading of the limitations of democratization initiatives born of nation-state defined 'regime change'.

However, in reconsidering the writings by Öcalan that are inspiring (and also inspired by) the recent political re-configuration of the municipalities controlled or influenced by the Kurdish movement, we are also faced with a number of questions and paradoxes. While in his writings the Kurdish leader is explaining Kurdish nationalism as a modern phenomena and warning of

⁴⁹ Doreen Massey, *For Space*, Sage Publications, London, 2005.

the dangers he considers inherent in all forms of nationalism, including Kurdish nationalism, Öcalan nevertheless depicts Kurds as one of the most ancient peoples of the world, and reiterates their history as legitimizing the contemporary, i.e. as explanatory of and therefore justifying Kurdish existence (identity) and the political demands of the Kurdish movement.⁵⁰ The employment of a (pre-)historical mythology of an identified ethnic group in the service of its present-day claims is, one cannot fail to note, a classical ingredient of nationalist narration. What is more, the Kurds appear as a predestined or ‘chosen’ people who are to set other peoples and the Middle Eastern region free. Mesopotamia is employed as a myth that is to help raise collective awareness and to mobilize the masses.

The alternative Kurdish social and political space that is being developed in the Southeast of Turkey is also, we cannot deny, nurturing the sense of ‘being Kurdish’ and fleshing out the reality of what it means to be ‘Kurdish’, and thus realizing the idea of a people, actively constituting a nation. Equally, the MSF – although aspiring to present the Kurdish movement as a universal movement for radical political change and trying to incorporate a broad range of different political groups on the left of the political spectrum, as well as different ethnic and religious minorities – was almost exclusively focused on local and regional concerns. It contributed to a presentation of ‘the Kurdish people’ being simultaneously victims and challengers of the status quo.

The ideas and undertakings discussed raise questions such as those linked to concepts of ethno-nationality suggested of Öcalan’s work. It certainly appears somewhat paradoxical, if not plain contradictory, that the new ideological ideals of the Kurdish movement criticizing any kind of state formation are at the same time functioning as the explanatory framework for what some would regard as a proto-state locally being developed. Indeed, Watts has already pointed out that whereas the BDP mayors (and their predecessors in DEHAP and the DTP) have been seeking to de-Turkify their municipalities, they are at the same time developing their own instruments of governmentality in order to manage, control and Kurdify the local population.⁵¹ In the mayors’ defense, it can of course be argued that, sensitized by the consciousness of decades of oppression – and for the older ones especially, this has been very much a lived consciousness – at least they are enacting the new nationalism, if that is what it

⁵⁰ Abdullah Öcalan, *War and Peace in Kurdistan. Perspectives for a political solution of the Kurdish Question*. Köln: International Initiative freedom for Öcalan – peace in Kurdistan, 2008.

⁵¹ Nicole F. Watts, “Pro-Kurdish mayors in as-if democracy: symbolic politics in Diyarbakır”, *Conference Paper* presented at the World Congress of Kurdish Studies, 6-9 September, 2006, Erbil.

is, in a more democratic, tolerant fashion than had previously been the case with the old one. In other words, huge shifts have taken place in the political landscape of southeast Turkey and there is certainly an ongoing process of radical reform, but it remains unclear whether it is a revolution that has started or whether the Kurdish Movement will be able to live up to its own proclaimed revolutionary credentials.

Biographical note

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